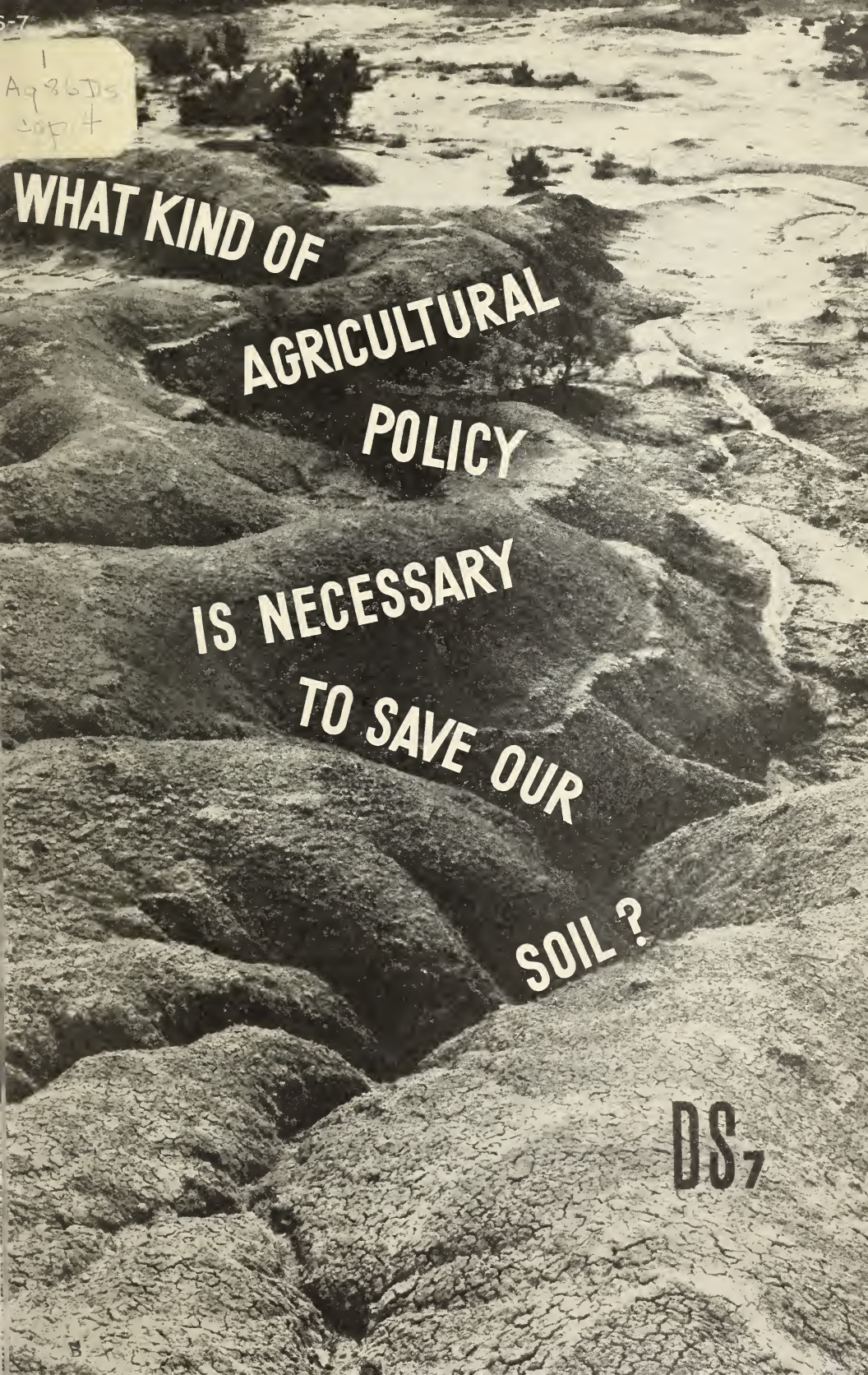


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**WHAT KIND OF
AGRICULTURAL
POLICY
IS NECESSARY
TO SAVE OUR
SOIL ?**

DS-7

This pamphlet is the seventh of the materials prepared for the assistance of rural discussion groups in 1936-37 through the cooperation of the Extension Service and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. It is not intended to direct attention to any particular point of view or conclusion, and no statement contained herein should be construed as an official expression of the Department of Agriculture. The materials listed below attempt to present, in readable, nontechnical language, discussions of issues related to rural life. Their contents are not offered as either complete or orderly presentations, but as collections of current facts and attitudes which may be of use to rural people who are thinking about these questions for themselves.

Materials have been prepared for the 1936-37 season on the following topics:

- DS-1. What Should Be the Farmers' Share in the National Income?**
- DS-2. How Do Farm People Live in Comparison with City People?**
- DS-3. Should Farm Ownership Be a Goal of Agricultural Policy?**
- DS-4. Exports and Imports—How Do They Affect the Farmer?**
- DS-5. Is Increased Efficiency in Farming Always a Good Thing?**
- DS-6. What Should Farmers Aim to Accomplish Through Organization?**
- DS-7. What Kind of Agricultural Policy Is Necessary to Save Our Soil?**
- DS-8. What Part Should Farmers in Your County Take in Making National Agricultural Policy?**

Two pamphlets on technique, intended primarily for the assistance of leaders of rural discussion groups and forums, are also available:

- D-1. A Brief Guide to Methods (revised 1936).**
- D-2. How to Organize and Conduct County Forums (revised 1936).**

United States Department of Agriculture

The Extension Service and the
Agricultural Adjustment Administration cooperating
(Illustrations by Works Progress Administration, Soil Conservation Service, and
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WHAT KIND OF AGRICULTURAL POLICY IS NECESSARY TO SAVE OUR SOIL?

Americans are waking up to the fact that soil conservation is one of the most important jobs ahead. What have you to say on the following questions:

1. Are losses through soil erosion and soil depletion serious enough to require a continuous national policy?
2. Can we work out of our difficulties by using individual judgment on individual farms?
3. What has been the history of our forests under private initiative?
4. Should we have agricultural policies put into effect in times of drought—like 1934 and 1936—and in times of price depression—like 1932—but not in normal times?
5. Is local policy, or state policy, adequate to deal with droughts and depressions? With production in normal years?
6. Why haven't more farmers in the past been careful with their soil? Would most farmers be willing to take care of their soil if they could afford it?
7. What can be done to save our soil? How can farmers afford to do it?
8. Who suffers eventually when we waste our national resources? Why should the Government be interested in conservation?
9. If you were working out an agricultural policy for the nation, would you stress a long-time point of view? What would you include? Why?

WHAT KIND OF AGRICULTURAL POLICY IS NECESSARY TO SAVE OUR SOIL?

"I can't see why there's been so much hollering lately about saving the soil," remarks a successful farmer when a group gets together for a little plain talk. "I never had any trouble holding my soil. The weather blows, rains, snows just like it always did."

"Well, you'd see why there's been so much hollering, if your farm was washing and gullyng like mine, and plenty other farms I know," another farmer comes back at him. "Lots of us feel it's time to do some real hard thinking on what looks like a mighty serious proposition: SHOULD WE PAY MORE ATTENTION TO SAVING THE SOIL? and HOW IS IT TO BE DONE?"

HOW HAVE WE LOOKED AT LAND IN THE PAST?

"It's just another one of those new-fangled notions, going at it the way they do," inserts one of the oldest men. "The Government never bothered to talk about soil conservation when they were so busy giving the land away to get it settled."

"That's true enough. The idea then was to settle the frontier quick as possible," says another old-timer. "I can remember how all the towns were growing and people kept pushing farther and farther out. Why, LAND VALUES SHOT UP FAST AS WEEDS. People bought land and held it just to sell. Everybody wanted to get rich quick!

"There was plenty of untouched land then. If a man didn't have a good farm, he just moved on to another one."

"There was plenty of timber, too," adds a young farmer who went to a C. C. C. camp. "But they cut out the forests

about as clean as a whistle. Look at some of the stumps they left for us today."

"Quick profits did it, like I said," the old farmer went on. "Right on down through and after the War, that was about all folks were interested in. PEOPLE DID AS THEY PLEASED WITH OUR NATURAL RESOURCES, and there wasn't anybody to lift a staying hand, or point out that maybe some day the country as a whole was bound to suffer for their greedy waste."

IS IT TIME TO CHANGE OUR MINDS ON LAND POLICY?

"Well, we're getting along all right," says another farmer. "I don't see that things are suffering like you say. There's plenty of good land left."

"But how long will it be good?" asks a farmer everybody knows as being especially careful in the way he treats his soil. "It's perfectly plain how the different kinds of erosion work: even if gullies don't wash out, sheet erosion goes on every time it rains—and when there's drought the wind comes along and lifts dust storms so bad sometimes they seem like fog."

"It looks to me like WE'VE GOT TO WAKE UP TO THE NEED FOR CHANGE," the young farmer asserts. "Why should we go on looking at American land as something to be used up as quick as possible when we can see how destructive that point of view has already been?"

"Why, do you realize that right here in the U. S. A. at least 50 MILLION ACRES OF ONCE GOOD LAND HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY RUINED for producing crops? But it doesn't stop there: another 50 million are almost as bad; 100 MILLION ACRES NOW IN CULTIVATION HAVE LOST A LARGE PART OF THE ORIGINAL PRODUCING SOIL through the quiet undercover work of sheet erosion—and another 100 million acres are well on their way to the same condition.

"And when you stop to think that it takes nature anywhere from 3 to 6 hundred years to build back a single inch of top-soil, it makes you see we've been spending our

most valuable natural resource like a lot of drunken sailors!"

"It appears to me farmers ought to get down to business and WORK OUT A LONG-TIME CONSERVATION PROGRAM if they're interested in what's happening to the basis of their living," a thoughtful individual contributes. "They ought to be willing enough. It's to their benefit."

WHO'S TO BLAME FOR LETTING THE SOIL ERODE?

"But is it to their benefit?" asks one of the older men. "I think you're taking it too much for granted that farmers see ahead far enough to be sure of what's working for their good. Who's to blame for present soil erosion, if not the farmer? The city folks who buy the farmer's products didn't have anything to do with it, did they?"

"Well, a farmer's immediate interests and his long-time interests don't always jibe," some one else puts in. "Just like THE FARMER'S IMMEDIATE INTERESTS AND THE NATION'S INTERESTS DON'T ALWAYS GO HAND-IN-HAND."

"Look at the reasons why soil erosion is serious as it is. Of course some farmers just don't know how to take the right kind of care of the soil. But most of 'em are smart enough—they know what OUGHT TO BE DONE all right, even if they don't do it. That's where private and national interests clash."

"Look at the farmers who plowed up LAND THAT NEVER SHOULD HAVE BEEN PLOWED. Plenty of 'em knew it at the time, but prices were good so they went right ahead. Slogans like 'Food Will Win the War' have more to do with our dust storms than appears at first thought. Well, they made their money then—but where are they today? They want help and they need help from the Federal Government to get them out of their scrape. If Uncle Sam doesn't come to the rescue, nobody else will."

"Then lots of FARMS ARE BOUGHT BECAUSE SOMEBODY HOPES TO TURN THEM AT A QUICK PROFIT."

It's just pure and simple speculation. It certainly isn't to these people's immediate interest to take any care of the soil. All they want is to get as much out as they can while they're holding on, then let go and do the whole thing over again with another piece of property. That's where the Nation suffers in the face of private profit.

"And take tenancy. WHY SHOULD A TENANT BOTHER TO IMPROVE THE SOIL when he never gets paid for his improvements, and when like as not he's planning to move on to another farm next season? The landlord wants as much as he can get, and the tenant wants the same thing—so when they get through, the soil has been mined of its fertility for cash crop profits. Again it's a question of immediate interests.

"THE BIG MOVEMENT BACK TO THE FARM during the depression hasn't helped the soil any, either. It's put extra pressure on submarginal areas, and means that more folks are trying to make a living out of the land—when there were already too many in the first place. That makes things harder for them all.

"A special reason many farmers seem careless of their soil is because they have such HEAVY DEBT BURDENS. They bought land at high prices and are paying high interest rates. If they can't make enough money to keep in the clear each year, they're just out of luck! That means CUTTHROAT COMPETITION INSTEAD OF CO-OPERATION. They try to raise a larger proportion of the whole crop than their neighbors, even though surpluses have already driven down prices to the breaking point. Of course, when they go in for growing all they can, soil conservation practices get thrown to the winds. THE FARMER'S INCOME IS OUT OF BALANCE in comparison with city income.

"The upshot of the whole thing is that MANY FARMERS REALLY CAN'T AFFORD TO SAVE THE SOIL. And the tragedy is that NEITHER THE FARMERS NOR THE NATION CAN AFFORD NOT TO SAVE THE SOIL!

"It's plain enough that FARMERS ARE CAUGHT BY THE PRESSURE OF AN ECONOMIC SYSTEM that has

driven them pretty close to ruin. Except where farmers are plain lazy or ignorant, the fact that our soil is eroding isn't any more the farmer's fault individually than it is city folks' fault individually. Both HAVE TO OPERATE AGAINST THE COMMON GOOD—against the Nation's good—if they're to keep heads above water in the competitive economic race."

"Well, it doesn't look any too cheerful for the future," inserts the young farmer emphatically. "We've all got children coming along, and I hate to think of the struggle they'll face. But it seems to me that with farmers working together and Government cooperating, there ought to be a number of ways out."

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PRESERVE OUR GOOD LAND?

"If we can't depend on individual initiative, then it's just too bad!" remarks a wealthy farmer. "The Government only gets in the way. If a man won't take care of his property himself, there's no reason why somebody else should take care of it for him."

"Besides, I think that if everybody's private interests are served, then the public interest is served to best advantage."

"If farmers can't afford to save the soil, isn't it to the Nation's benefit to save it?" retorts the young farmer. "When farmers get economic help, it's certainly to public advantage."

"FARMERS NEED EDUCATION a lot more than they need the Government monkeying with their incomes," breaks in a third speaker. "Look at the soil conservation demonstrations that are being put on all over the country, and the way the farmer soil conservation committees are cooperating. Don't you think it helps to show farmers the most modern and scientific ways of saving the soil?"

"What if farmers hold back production and build fertility for a long time—and then let loose and plant a normal crop on the improved soil? Won't they get a yield big enough to knock prices clear to thunder—worse than 1932?" inserts another voice.

"There are certainly plenty of things about the soil that are important to know—for example, just how we're running through our supply of phosphorus. That's one of the most important elements for a growing plant, and one of the hardest to replace when it's gone," the young man continues.

"It's hard to believe that TONS AND TONS OF SOIL WASH AWAY EVERY TIME IT RAINS. But it's true, and the experiments show just exactly how much water runs off every kind of slope planted to different kinds of crops, and what the best ways are to check it."

"Sure," another farmer agrees, "take a look at any creek or river after a rain, and watch the silt boil. Sometimes I see it and think how only a little while before that earth belonged to me—and now it's rushing away to build up a mud flat or fill up a dam."

"The big dams don't fill up if check dams are built on the little waters," says the young farmer who went to the C. C. C. camp. "Like replanting forests, dams help to keep down floods."

"Seems to me as though the place to start is on individual farms," inserts another farmer. "I never did like to see the way some folks overgraze their land or plow hill-sides they know good and well ought to stay in brush."

"There's terracing and contour furrowing to help hold the soil," adds one of the older farmers. "But the trouble is too many of us lock the barn door after there's not hair nor hide left of the mare. Plenty of farmers could be strip-cropping—and then they'd have some moisture in the sod when a dry season comes. And it's not so hard to keep fertility if a man'll plant winter and summer cover crops to build up humus and stop so much leaching. With hillsides in grass, crop rotation, and legumes, lots of farmers wouldn't be complaining about the way their yield drops year after year."

"Studying how much and where to shift your crops is one way county planning helps," adds the young farmer.



Wind Erosion Caused This.

"But what I want to know is HOW CAN FARMERS AFFORD TO TREAT THE SOIL THE WAY THEY KNOW THEY OUGHT TO? Even if all farmers were farm owners and the big tenancy problem solved, things still wouldn't be rosy as far as saving the soil is concerned."

"What really matters is a man's attitude toward his land," one of the old men remarks. "If you could fatten up many farmers' pocketbooks you wouldn't have a very tough time getting them to treat their soil right. But there are a lot of others who'd go on treating their land like speculators no matter how much money they were getting out of it. Look at what a lot of them did during the War."

"Yet for the present, it looks like SPECIAL BENEFITS are going to be necessary to make conservation worth the farmer's while, as well as worth the Nation's while."

"SUBSIDY TO THE FARMER IS JUST AS BAD AS SUBSIDY TO INDUSTRY," some one points out emphatically. "Both ought to stand on their own feet."

"But industry doesn't stand on its own feet," asserts the old farmer. "Look at all the help the manufacturers have had from the Government in years past."

"Could prices the farmer pays and prices the farmer gets be settled in something like a fair ratio so that folks would know what to count on from year to year?" asks the young man.

"Well, look what's happened to farmers in the past. The industrial market is controlled by the manufacturers—they don't produce any more than they figure they can sell. That keeps prices up, and you have to pay what they ask if you want something they make. But what have farmers always done? Have they adjusted their production to what they know they can sell? And what happened to prices when they didn't? Every man produced all he possibly could, regardless of what the market would take—and when the whole surplus production was all rolled up together, why, the farmer sold his products for less than it cost him to grow 'em," asserts the old-timer.

"What we've really had, then, is PRODUCTION FOR PLENTY BY FARMERS AND PRODUCTION FOR SCARCITY BY MANUFACTURERS?" asks the young man.

"Any sort of farm policy has to take all this into account," the older farmer continues. "If the farmers cooperate in order to increase their bargaining ability with industry, in the long run it will help industry as much as it does the farmers. When rural folks have more money, they buy more things—so the people they buy from have to increase production. And when industrial production is increased, a certain amount more jobs are to be had—and more city people can afford to buy what the farmer grows. It's sort of a circle that goes round and round."

"Well, farmers have been doing their job more and more efficiently for a long time now," says another man. "Even with the heavy overhead they have to bear, it looks to me like better farming would cut their costs enough to give 'em more returns in the long run."

"But what about drought and insect plagues that sweep away all a farmer earns in good times?" someone asks. "WON'T CROP INSURANCE HELP, by making the farmer feel more secure against the lean years?"

"Perhaps," answers the old-timer, "but one way or another, it looks like the Government is in the swim to stay, as far as helping rural income is concerned. And HELPING RURAL INCOME WILL BE HELPING TO TAKE CARE OF THE SOIL."

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT OUR BAD LAND?

"If the farmer can't help himself in protecting good land, how in the world can he be expected to do anything about the land already ruined or so near ruined folks can barely exist on it?" is asked.

"That's where a national land policy is absolutely necessary," someone replies. "It's a cinch individual farmers can't do anything about submarginal lands. Some areas have been exploited to the last ditch—and the Government must do whatever is done."

"In grazing regions where grass still lives it might be possible to adjust the number of cattle or sheep on the range to the best carrying capacity of the range, of course figuring on the basis of a steady yield.

"But BUYING UP SUBMARGINAL LAND is about the only way actually to get it out of operation." In the dry plains areas many farmers probably would have to be resettled somewhere else on better land. But that's not the only place—the South has sections where part of the people ought to be moved, and so have the North Central States. There are plenty of local problems."

"That means a policy of NATIONAL OWNERSHIP OF SUBMARGINAL LANDS, like our ownership of NATIONAL FORESTS," the young farmer remarks. "Why couldn't areas be zoned for good land use? Wouldn't that be a real step toward sure-enough conservation?"

"WE NEED TO PLAN TO MAKE UP FOR THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST," the old-timer says thoughtfully. "It seems to me any first class land policy in one way or another would have to ASSURE FARMERS OF A REASONABLE INCOME for the work they do. And if farmers want to increase their income, they'll have to cooperate both in production and marketing.

"Then we ought to be sure LAND IS USED FOR THE PURPOSE IT BEST SUITS. Basically, that means real conservation, real saving the soil.

"And then we've got to have an ADEQUATE FOOD SUPPLY all the time. The whole Nation ought to think of its food supply as an ever-normal granary.

"Where farmers felt such a program was for the national good and their own good as well," persists the old man, "it would take continued cooperation in local planning and national planning from a far-flung, long-time point of view. SOME INDIVIDUALS HAVE WASTED NATURAL RESOURCES which are basically the people's.

"After all, what does conservation mean? It's the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest possible period of time—but you've got to figure on what

folks need today, as well as the needs of the young folks who'll take up where we leave off."

What points about saving the soil have these people missed? What would you add? Why?

Do you agree that we have generally allowed our natural resources to be wasted? If so, what do you think can be done about it?

DO ALL THE PEOPLE depend on natural resources and **DO ALL THE PEOPLE GET THE BENEFITS** of them? Why or why not?

Is it true that in the **LONG RUN** what hurts the national welfare also **HURTS THE INDIVIDUAL'S WELFARE**? What examples can you think of?

MORE ABOUT SOIL CONSERVATION

(Quantity prices may be secured on many of these publications)

Material on State and local aspects of the soil conservation problem has been prepared by and is obtainable from the Agricultural Colleges of many States. The National Resources Board's "State Planning—A Review of Activities and Progress," June 1935 (price \$0.75), summarizes the work of the States.

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